

SERENDIPITY

Brad Gau felt sleepy while listening to their instructor. He had already studied some of the topics the previous night and had slept for only four hours. If it hadn't been for the instructor's irritatingly loud voice, he might have fallen asleep long ago. She was an expert in the subject she was handling, but her teaching style was not effective. Their professor was a pretty young woman of medium height. She wore fitted glossy pants that accentuated the outline of her hips and other related parts. This spectacle didn't stir Brad's feelings. He was one hundred percent male and was sure of it, but he wasn't particularly interested in the opposite sex. Brad was one of the campus crushes, and this fact annoyed him. His female classmates continuously cajoled him, and their flattery undeniably had an uplifting effect on him, although he never took it seriously.

The room was cooled by an air conditioner installed at the far end. Brad was fortunate because his father was the mayor of the city. However, he felt like just one of those ordinary students roaming the city school campus. Despite the special treatment he received because of his father's position, he understood or tried to understand it in his secret thoughts. Like many youths, he carelessly took these special favors for granted.

He was the type who was obsessed with trying everything that came his way. An uncontrollable impulse was always surging inside him, ready to seize anything at hand just for its own sake. He had developed this habit from a young age and had developed a taste for it.

His concentration was interrupted when he saw two guys outside the room. His classmates noticed them too and glanced at him. He ignored their curious eyes and focused on the two individuals who were grinning impishly—Arles Celine and Mario Tacoma. Arles was Brad's cousin, and Mario was the Dean's son.

Brad signaled them to wait. He noticed the instructor's stern gaze, which caused him to divert his attention back to her. She continued her lecture as if nothing had happened. He resumed looking at his friends and projected a silly smile. He remembered what Arles had said the previous day and felt anxious about recalling it. However, he couldn't turn down his friends' invitation. The bell rang as their instructor finished her lecture, leaving them with an assignment to submit the next day. Brad felt a sense of relief but not a cure for all his troubles. His friends were waiting leisurely outside. One was looking at his classmates, searching for a potential target of interest, while the other, wearing thinly tinted sunglasses, was busy on his cellphone. His classmates hurriedly left the room, but Brad remained in his chair as if he would stay there forever. When the last student had left, Arles and Mario entered the room. They took some chairs: Arles sat directly in front of him, and Mario was in the row opposite.

They were silent for a while. Brad was the first to speak. "Oh my God, if this continues... I'm afraid my head will swell." Arles smiled at Brad's comment and said,

"That's what I was telling you yesterday. Why force yourself to be an Einstein when you're not even sure of yourself?"

Brad seemed not to hear what his cousin was talking about. He kept staring at the whiteboard riddled with scribbles and solved algebra problems, as if trying to discern any secret in the equations laid before him.

"Are the two of you coming tonight?" Arles ventured to ask. "I will come if Brad comes too," Mario said. His almost husky voice was difficult to place. "C'mon, you two, stop behaving like monks! Enjoy life!" Arles emphasized the last two words. "I'm enjoying myself," Brad replied, looking at Arles as if he were a grandfather criticizing a spoiled grandson.

"How?" Arles posed, as if questioning the heavens. His eyes were fixed on the concrete ceiling. Brad did not answer Arles's annoying question and continued his meditation-like silence. Although they were cousins, Brad never knew Arles's parents well. It was Arles who had introduced himself on the first day of school. When Brad told his father about it, he confirmed that it was true: Arles's mother was the mayor's sister. Brad never gave Arles much importance. In his deepest thoughts, he often whispered to himself that he should avoid Arles. But, as time went by, he became accustomed to the mild disturbances that Arles created.

"Just tell me frankly, guys, are you two interested in going out tonight?" Arles's face showed the appearance of someone about to cry. "If Brad goes out tonight, I will too," Mario repeated. When Arles heard this, his face reflected an awkward half-smile. "Okay, okay... then everything will depend on Brad's decision." Brad was already staring at Arles, watching his every action. He was about to utter his answer when Arles interrupted him: "Okay, no need to say anything... save that for tonight. Excuse me, guys... I have a class in a few minutes. I'm going now... see you," Arles said with a wide grin as he left the room, humming a cheerful tune. Brad widened his eyes and gestured as if frightened. Then he looked at where Mario was sitting and broke into laughter, which Mario joined. After that, Brad stood up and said, "C'mon, let's get out of here before we go mad."

The school where Brad Gau was studying was a private institution administered by a businessman. There were several colleges in Empernum; however, they were government-owned and the quality of education suffered as a result. Unlike Estaca College, whose number one priority was academic excellence. These characteristics made the school a popular choice among wealthy parents, despite the expensive fees and miscellaneous costs.

However, like every college around the globe, this institution was plagued with different kinds of radical minds, leading to problems that challenged the administration. Fraternity groups were one of the hottest issues on campus. Their numbers increased every year. At first, the Dean did not consider it a major problem until a student died from hazing. The news spread quickly and became a major topic on campus. Many parents became hesitant to let their sons and daughters enroll at Estaca College. For the first time, the Dean left his chair and led a campaign to eradicate all existing fraternities on campus. However, he found it impossible to do

so. There was a law protecting the rights of these fraternities, and the rallies held on campus disrupted ongoing classes. To restore order, he ordered every existing fraternity to register so they could be recognized. The students agreed and signed a written promise not to create any unnecessary acts that disrupted the harmonious environment of the school. But promises were made to be broken. More fraternities appeared, and some minor problems persisted, though the administration tried to suppress them.

Brad and Mario were absent from their respective classes in the afternoon. Instead of enduring the boredom of listening to their instructors, their minds were occupied with curiosity as they explored the wonders of a secret laboratory. This laboratory was personally owned by Mario. As a Chemistry student, Mario had managed to persuade his father to spend a significant amount on setting up the lab. His father was hesitant at first but eventually agreed on the grounds that it was for his son's development.

The size of the room was sufficient for an amateur. It was equipped with all the necessary instruments and apparatuses, and shelves of different sizes surrounded the room, each stuffed with containers of various colors. Every container had a label written on a small cut-out bond paper, fastened with scotch tape.

Brad had already been in the laboratory twice. The first visit was with Arles, who didn't like the place despite Mario's enthusiasm. Arles spent his time talking about his latest girlfriends and criticizing Mario's future profession. They nearly had a fight that time, but Brad, caught in the middle, was relieved when the disagreement lasted only a few minutes. Interestingly, asking for forgiveness came easily to Arles, and Mario could easily apologize as well.

Mario peeked into the electron microscope to observe the movement of two molecules from the chemicals he had mixed. He adjusted the screw to make the picture clearer. A couple of green molecules were trying to push away six pink molecules. He watched their activities for a while.

"Any developments in your experiments?" Brad asked, picking up one of the folders stacked on the table. The first page bore the title "Illegal Drugs and Their Effects on Human Consciousness." His brow furrowed, revealing his concern about what he saw. "Oh, paperwork... there's so much of it in your lab. Aren't you tired of looking at it?" Brad's voice carried a note of disgust.

"Not anymore," Mario said, peeking back into the microscope and ignoring his friend's reaction. "I wish everything could be stored in the mind rather than on paper..."

"That would be a disaster... everyone would go mad trying to memorize everything," Mario said with a smile, still focused on the molecules.

"I think I can guess what's on your mind right now," Mario said, looking at Brad. "Ha, don't tell me you've become a psychic." Brad quickly masked his face with a smile.

"About your fraternity... you're still working on it, right?" Mario's sunglasses flashed in the light. Brad looked serious for a moment before sighing.

"Yeah, but I'm not worried about drafting the bylaws. What discourages me is the problem of recruiting members." Mario looked at Brad sympathetically through his tinted glasses.

"Don't worry, we'll work on it. Those who refuse our offer will regret it in the end because we'll organize a fraternity that will have millions... no, not just millions but billions of members—ha ha ha." Mario soon noticed that Brad was looking at him seriously. "Well, I say it like that, but I'm serious about helping you organize your fraternity... not just yours but ours!"

"I know you're serious about helping... and also Arles. I can feel it. I'm glad I have friends who support me in my plans," Brad said, forcing a smile. "Well, we're getting serious here. What's your plan for tonight? Oh! That Arles is such a happy-go-lucky guy!"

Mario was the first to think of starting a fraternity, but he never admitted he was serious about it. In reality, he never really was; he had merely brought up the topic to have something to talk about. The three of them had been sitting on a beach on the school campus, under some trees, watching the ladies pass by. Brad took the idea seriously and told his friends that he wanted to create his own fraternity, with the two of them as the first members.

Now, Brad was on his way to the meeting place. The road was illuminated with multicolored lights. The sky was clear, and it seemed like dawn, contrary to the time shown by his glowing wristwatch—7:30, which was before the actual time they had agreed upon. He felt anxious while driving. The car stereo was playing a rock song, which he hoped would alleviate his boredom—it somewhat served the purpose. He kept an eye on the neon lights ahead to ensure he didn't miss the bar. The required speed for vehicles made it difficult to slow down, which complicated identifying the signs on the side of the road.

Brad wanted to keep his distance from Arles. He was hesitant about mingling with the people who populated his cousin's world. They had different tastes when it came to socializing. He preferred being with a quiet individual like Mario rather than feeling out of place with people he found annoying.

He spotted a red, rounded neon signboard easily accessible by turning left at the intersection. He slowed the car and turned left, relieved that no other vehicles were in his way. There were a dozen or more cars parked outside the bar. Brad parked his car beside the others and went inside. Two burly men stood outside the door, eyeing him as he slightly acknowledged them. He passed through the dancing crowd.

Arles and Mario were seated on the west side of the bar, their eyes scanning the crowd, especially the ladies. They smiled and exchanged observations, occasionally bursting into laughter.

When they saw him approaching, Arles's face showed relief. He stood up, pulled out a chair, and offered it to Brad, clearly pleased to see his cousin. "At last..." Arles placed the chair between himself and Mario. He sat down once Brad had taken his seat. "I thought you'd never come... but never mind." Arles then got up and went to the bartender.

"Arles came to our house, and I just hitched a ride with him," Mario said, not looking at Brad. "I was hesitant about coming. I didn't like what happened last time. But I hope tonight will be different."

"I don't think so..." Brad whispered, noticing Arles's leer. Mario's gaze was on Arles, though he wasn't looking at them anymore.

"Yeah, this will be a..." Brad didn't finish his sentence as Arles returned with a bottle of gin and ice. The bartender followed with shot glasses. Brad looked at Mario, but Mario only smiled weakly, as if to say there was nothing he could do about it but to relax. The bottle of gin was already open. Arles filled one of the glasses, which already contained two ice cubes. He grinned while doing it, as if he found something amusing about the situation. Mario's eyes were on Brad, who was watching a lithe figure dancing gracefully not far from their table. Arles noticed Brad's gaze.

"She's Marisol... Do you like her?" Arles asked straightforwardly.

"I know. We're classmates in one subject," Brad replied, surprised that his companions seemed to know what was on his mind.

Mario poured some gin into one of the glasses and smelled the aroma before drinking. "Smells like hell," he said.

Brad took one of the glasses meant for him, slowly filled it with gin, and drank it quickly. "Don't rush it," Arles said with a laugh. "I drink it quickly because I don't like the burning sensation in my throat."

"The first time I drank, I couldn't help but cough," Mario said, adjusting his sunglasses on his forehead like a hairband. His eyes always seemed sleepy.

"Coughing was why I didn't take up smoking as a vice," Arles said as he poured gin into a shot glass. They were soon surprised when the lady Brad had been watching earlier came over to their table, focusing her attention on Brad.

"I saw you looking at me," she said. She had an oval face framed by straight, shoulder-length dyed hair. Her eyes seemed to sparkle with intrigue, and her lips were animated with a hint of secret mirth. She took a chair from an unoccupied table, placed it in front of Brad, and sat down gracefully, crossing her legs. The slit of her dress parted to reveal smooth, healthy legs. Arles's jaw dropped at the sight.

"You're Brad, right?" Her voice was sultry.

"Yes. You're Marisol Cadigan. We're classmates in Biology," Brad said matter-of-factly.

"Wow! So I don't need to introduce myself," she said, pouring some gin into the glass near Brad. She closed her eyes before taking a sip of the liquor. "I heard your fraternity is recruiting students."

"Yeah!" Brad was slightly surprised and looked at Arles and Mario. Arles's eyes were on Marisol, while Mario was once again focused on his cellphone.

"And... you want to be one of the members?" Brad asked, grinning. Marisol looked at him, their gazes locked. "But on one condition..." Marisol said, her voice almost a whisper.

"What condition?" Brad asked.

"You have to be my boyfriend first," she said simply. Arles's jaw dropped even further, and he looked at Mario, who had momentarily stopped texting. "Is that it? Okay. No problem," Brad said, his voice filled with mixed emotions. He simply grinned. On the other hand, Marisol was thrilled with Brad's response. She kissed him on the lips and then pulled him onto the dance floor. The people in the bar watched them with curious eyes as they danced passionately.

It was already 10:00 PM when they stopped dancing. Brad waved to his friends as he accompanied Marisol outside the bar. He didn't return inside. Arles and Mario couldn't help but laugh at their friend's luck.